

# How I Got a Red Face

Photograph by PH2 Micheal D. P. Flynn



A "red leg" takes the place of a strut that isn't available.

*By AE2(AW) Edward Burden*

**I**t was a day like any other. I awoke early, so I could get to work by 0630. That plan would give me time to make sure I did a thorough ATAF and would allow me to read the night-check passdown. That plan didn't prepare me for the excitement I would face before the day was out.

I went to my squadron's 0700 maintenance meeting. Once there, a maintenance-control chief told us several of our jets would fly cross-country missions over the weekend, returning on Sunday. As the leading petty officer for the troubleshooter workcenter and being a qualified FA-18 troubleshooter, my duty was to make sure all aircraft on the flight schedule were serviced and ready for the day's events.

With that thought in mind, I began my daily inspection of all aircraft to be flown. After I had inspected two aircraft, the maintenance senior chief told me one of the jets needed the nose tires changed before leaving. The senior chief said, "Make sure all four spacers are installed properly," and I said, "Yeah senior, I know...I got it."

The jets had to fly a long distance and make numerous stops. After looking at the tires, I

# Confident with the Petty Officer's Work and a Red Leg

agreed with the senior chief's decision about a tire change. I knew a quick change now was better than a jet with a blown nose tire hundreds of miles away.

I looked at my watch and saw we had 1.5 hours to get the tires changed. I gathered tools, new tires, and an AM troubleshooter, and we headed toward the jet to do the job. Having done this simple task many times before, we didn't bother to bring the maintenance pubs. That decision was my first mistake.

We didn't have much time, so I decided to change one tire while the AM3 did the other one—my second mistake. I was the CDI for this job, and I know you never inspect your own work.

We jacked the jet's nose and deflated the tires to remove them safely. I took off the bolts, safety wire, key washer, nuts, and pulled off the tire. With the port tire removed, I inspected the spacers. These critical items allow the wheel to spin freely without damaging the axle or the wheel.

After I inspected the removal, I readied the new tire to be installed, checking the bearings for integrity and ensuring they were the right ones for the FA-18C aircraft. Satisfied with that step, I installed the new tire, placing the inner spacer onto the axle. I then installed the tire, outer spacer, key washer, nuts, bolts, and safety wire.

Just as I finished my side, I could see the pilots walking early toward their jets. They weren't headed for this one, but I was the LPO and felt I needed to cover the launch. I faced a dilemma: I was changing a tire here, and the other aircraft were getting ready to launch and might need my help should they have technical problems. I decided to man the launch and left my shipmate to finish the starboard tire—without supervision. This was my third mistake.

After the first event launched, I went back to check on my AM3. He had trouble attaching safety wire to the tire, so I helped him. About this time, the pilot for this jet arrived. Confident

with the petty officer's work, I gave the wheel a cursory look and signed off the job, releasing the plane for the cross-country flight. Feeling a sense of urgency, I didn't inspect the tire thoroughly—my fourth mistake and a critical one.

On Monday morning, I was told the bearings in that last tire had dislodged when the jet landed in Utah on Sunday. Our squadron would have to send a maintenance rescue team to Utah. After a thorough investigation, the team found the outer spacer had not been installed during the tire change, and the nose-gear axle was damaged beyond repair.

Our squadron now had a jet down for several months. Luckily, no pieces of the broken bearing were sucked into the intakes. The pilot wasn't hurt, and the aircraft wasn't lost.

The lessons in this story are simple. I couldn't blame the young maintainer for this error. It was my responsibility as a CDI to make sure the job was done right. I also never should have CDI'd my own work. If we had taken the pub out to the job and followed it step by step, the outer spacer would not have been overlooked. I was the shop supervisor and should have prioritized my workload. Had I done that, I could have made sure all tasks were covered.

That jet now sits like a permanent fixture. It has a dummy strut (called a "red leg)," and I live with the knowledge that my mistakes put it there. 

Petty Officer Burden is the troubleshooter LPO at VFA-94.

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